

Moralism or Morality



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The INQUIRER

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Nonconformist religious newspaper

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

*From the Object passed at the
General Assembly of the Unitarian and
Free Christian Churches 2001*

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Editor M Colleen Burns

46A Newmarket Road
Cringeliford

Norwich NR4 6UF

ph: 01603 505281

e: inquirer@btinternet.com

Copyeditor Sarah Reynolds

Find out more about the Unitarian and Free Christian movement or locate a congregation. Log on to www.unitarian.org.uk or email info@unitarian.org.uk

Write to

The General Assembly
Essex Hall

1-6 Essex Street

London WC2R 3HY

ph: 0207 2402384

Inquiring Words Peace

Peace is
a never ending striving
a journey which begins in individual hearts
contentment
attachment and detachment
understanding arrived at through listening
listening and responding to the shadows.

— *Michael Allured*

We pray for peace
for our children
but our children cannot know peace
if we ourselves live conflict and struggle.
So I pray instead
for the grace to close my mouth
on a cutting remark
and to turn my back on a quarrel;
to lift up love as a shield against anger
and let soft words soothe away old hurts.
I pray for the courage to say the hardest words;
"I'm sorry, forgive me"
and the strength for the hardest task:
of earning the forgiveness I ask.
This I pray, because
when we learn to live as if
this prayer has been answered,
then our children will learn from us
to live in peace.

— *Stephanie Cage*

There will be peace
when we listen to our noblest senses;
when we accept ourselves just as we are
and accept others similarly
when we respect ourselves
and respect others
when we listen to, and believe in ourselves
and listen to the truth in others
when we encourage ourselves in our day-to-day life
and encourage others.
Surely, the freedom we want for ourselves
we should want for them.

— *Jane Camac*

*Words spoken at the Peace Vespers held at the General
Assembly meetings at Nottingham.*

Choose morality over moralism

By Margaret Kirk

Moral clarity can appear in unexpected places. At the end of 2009 it was thrillingly present to me in the best selling crime novels of the radical Swedish journalist Stieg Larsson which rage against the power of institutions and give the moral high ground to a young, creative, bizarrely alternative and fearless young woman. I recommend them.

At the same time as I was reading Larsson, *The Guardian* had a leader highlighting the Conservative party's plans for promoting family values – particularly the institution of marriage which tends to come with a fair bit of moral packaging. It will be interesting to see if some of that packaging is removed in these extraordinary political times of coalition between Lib Dems and Tories. The newspaper's leader reminded me of how in one volume of her memoirs Margaret Thatcher had called for a return to traditional Christian morality and blamed family breakdown upon liberal values whilst, perhaps more presciently, Dr Carey – then-Archbishop of Canterbury, warned about the moral decline that would ensue as business descended into 'chaotic gangsterism'. I know which outrages me most. And then, perhaps not surprisingly, I am quick to take offence when I read that liberal values are the scourge of society. I am a Unitarian. I am in good company when I call myself an unrepentant religious liberal. I can find other value systems to blame if we are in the business of allocating blame for a moral vacuum.

What do we mean by morality?

Many of the Ten Commandments enshrined in the Jewish/Christian tradition are adhered to by most people regardless of whether they are religious or not, but it is not straightforward.

You shall not murder. You shall not steal. OK!

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour – probably true for most of us, but do we know or care who our neighbour is? You shall not covet your neighbour's wife. You shall not commit adultery. Are these still moral imperatives with the same prohibitive force as the first two or are we now much more forgiving and relaxed about such things?

The next one's a bit difficult: You shall not set your desire on your neighbour's house or land, his man servant, or maid servant, his ox, or donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbour. But doesn't our commercial culture actively encourage us to desire our neighbour's possessions?

Moral codes are all well and good but when you bear in mind

that the rule 'an eye for an eye' was laid down as an instruction to those seeking revenge who were likely to take two eyes for an eye – that it was, in fact, an attempt to restrain rather than to justify revenge, we begin to understand how codified rules have their limitations and always need to be understood in the culture from which they have sprung. And unless they are, most people will not only disregard them but also find them irrelevant and absurd. Many of us find it irrelevant and

absurd that some would leave the church because of ancient dictates that prevent women and gay and lesbian people from becoming ministers.

The funniest take on the irrelevance of rules that I've ever come across was in the form of a letter written to a Dr Laura Schlessinger, a US radio personality who gave moral advice to people who called into the show. The story goes that on one of her shows she made the point that to an orthodox Jew homosexuality is an abomination because according to Leviticus 18.22 it cannot be condoned in any circumstances. And we know that many Christians will refer to scriptural texts to support their views.

But this spawned a letter which did the rounds, caused a lot of amusement and at the same time makes a serious point:

This is part of the letter:

Dear Dr Laura,

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding

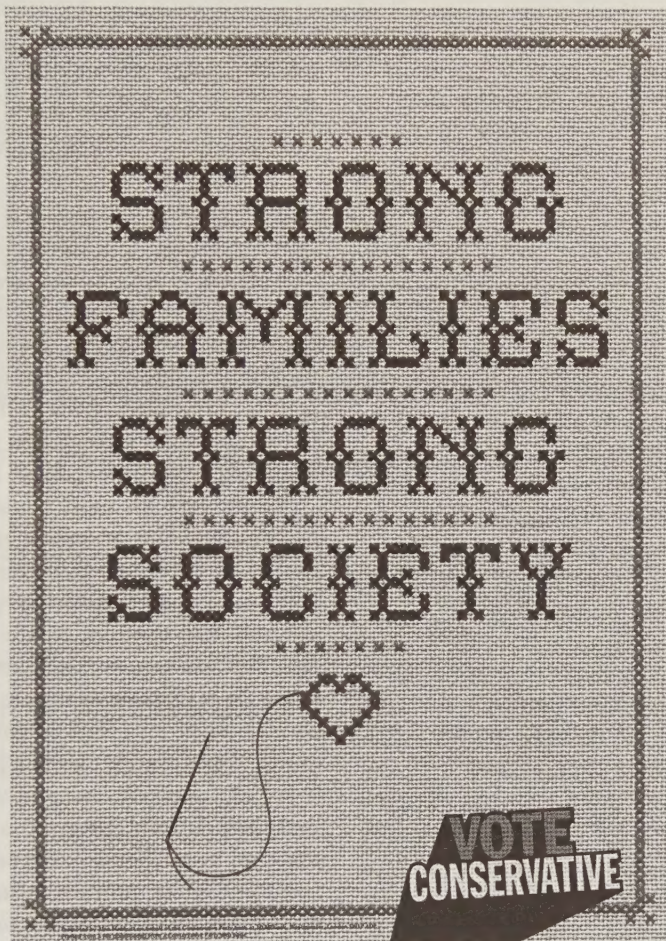
God's Law. I have learned a great deal from your show, and I try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind them that Leviticus 18.22 clearly states that it be an abomination. End of debate. I do need some advice from you however, regarding some of the other laws and how to follow them.....

When I burn a bull on the altar of sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odour for the Lord (Lev. 1.9) the problem is my neighbours. They claim the odour is not pleasing to them. Should I smite them?

I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21.7 In this day and age what do you think would be a fair price for her?

My uncle has a farm. He violates lev.19.19 by planting two separate crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it

(Continued on next page)



Morality allows for generosity

(Continued from previous page)

really necessary that we go to the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? (Lev. 24 10-19) Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair like we do people who sleep with their in-laws? (Lev. 20. 14)

I know that you have studied these things extensively so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging. Your devoted disciple and adoring fan.

Andrew Hill's book *The Unitarian Path* (1994, The Lindsey Press and Unitarians in Edinburgh) has an interesting section on the subject of ethics. He says that one of the tensions in human communities is between codified rules and conduct on the one hand and, on the other, the intuitive awareness of what is right and wrong. He says; "Some people hold the moral rule book should be followed under all circumstances lest the structures of society be undermined. Unitarians do not belong among these people. We have a long tradition of risking the priority of morality over moralism. Moral rules are in a dynamic and changing flow from time to time as circumstances change."

I've been thinking a bit about what it means to risk the priority of morality over moralism. Moralism tends to be concerned with strict rules – rules relating to right and wrong conduct; rules from which we are not expected to deviate. Morality, on the other hand is wider and more all embracing than fixed rules can permit. Morality allows for more flexibility when circumstances change. Morality allows for generosity of spirit.

It's that kind of morality that's at the heart of Jesus' teaching and behaviour – the liberal Christianity that we Unitarians cherish. Nowhere is that better exemplified than in Luke's story of the prostitute who spills perfumed oil on Jesus' feet. Jesus defends the woman despite the fact that her behaviour outrages his host. Jesus asks Simon a vital question: "Simon, do you see this woman?" Simon, the pious Pharisee, can't see her – that's the one thing he can't do. He can only classify her. He classifies her as a particular type of woman. He is so convinced of the sinful nature of her way of life. To Simon she is no more, no less, than a woman with a bad reputation in the town. But Jesus asks Simon to see her as a person:

He says: "I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss but this woman from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore I tell you her many sins have been forgiven because she loved much."

Jesus saw in her spontaneous homage a genuine act of morality. We see the man Jesus risking the priority of morality over moralism. Jesus takes risks in his defence of her because he was able to see love and contrition where Simon could only see wickedness. For Simon there was nothing to redeem her – she would revert to type. Jesus saw her faith and her love. He saw her in her wholeness.

The romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote some words about morals in 1880:

"The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our nature and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action or person, not our own. A man to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he

'I am a Unitarian. I am in good company when I call myself an unrepentant religious liberal.'

– Margaret Kirk



must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own."

Isn't this precisely what Jesus does? At that moment when he encounters the woman in Simon's house, he identifies with what is beautiful in her thought, action and person. He is moved with love and compassion.

If it's true, as Andrew Hill says, that we Unitarians have a long tradition of risking 'the priority of morality over moralism' then each of us needs to be clear about what that means.

For me and for most Unitarians, it means having faith in people, avoiding a cynical response in a world that seems to cherish cynicism. It means not assuming that people who come here as asylum seekers or as economic migrants are degenerate and devious, that our prison service must be more about reform than punishment; it means believing that managers in the business world have a moral responsibility as well as an economic one – that morality has to be part of the market place. When the business sector reward their managers with ever more fantastic sums of money, they break a moral ceiling: there is something gross and insensitive and essentially immoral about bonus payments of hundreds of thousands of pounds when people are losing jobs, worrying about keeping up payment on their houses and generally trying to make ends meet.

Human achievement is more than what is produced in the market place and morality is about recognizing the worth of human achievement in walks of life where financial incentives have little place.

The late Robert Kennedy had these words to say to economists who insisted upon seeing human achievement in purely material terms:

"The gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry, or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate, or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion, nor our devotion to our country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile."

The Rev Margaret Kirk takes services and works mainly with congregations in the North East of England and has pastoral oversight at Flowergate Chapel, Whitby.



Consider the experience of worship

Worship Panel Member **Barbara Smith** wrote this scenario in response to recent *Inquirer* articles on worship and growth. A survey finds that many feel the same way.

Sunday morning

10:45 – Arrive at chapel; no one greets you; it's not possible to sit quietly preparing for the service as the chairs are not yet set out.

10:55 – Sit down in worship space looking at plastic flowers in centre of the table; chalice and matches are placed on the table.

11:00 – Chalice lighting by worship leader, but it doesn't (light); success with the third match, and after several jocular asides by worship leader; matches are put back in full view by the chalice.

11:05 – Noisy entrance by latecomer during ingathering prayer.

11:15 – Dog wanders around chapel; startles some worshippers who are meditating with their eyes closed by pushing its nose into their hands.

11:25 – The mood of the service is broken as people fumble for their collection; 'whispered' conversation can be clearly heard.

11:30 – The address: worship leader can't find the right piece of paper; apologises (again); got it; delivers address reading monotonously and looking down; you lose the thread as much of what is said is inaudible; clearly audible though is the loud rustle of sweet paper from the row behind you.

11:55 – The closing hymn; phewee! After a barrage of words, many of which you couldn't hear, and a variety of discordant

sounds which you could hear only too clearly, you are now on the home straight.

Hope there's milk for the coffee.

Contained in that scenario are many of the things those of you who completed the Worship Panel questionnaire told us you found unhelpful or distracting in services of worship.

Of course the worship leader is key, but it is apparent that the behaviour of our fellow congregants can also be unhelpful and distracting, and that the aesthetics of the worship space matter to us.

So what **do we want** in a service? Well, being Unitarian, we are not consistent here, but of great importance are well chosen, clearly spoken words – readings (from a variety of sources), prayers and meditations, and the address.

We like worship leaders to be well prepared and calmly in control, so that we can settle into the experience of the service.

We like clear themes, and to know what is going on.

Music is an important element of services for many of us.

If there is ritual, such as chalice lighting, we like it to be performed appropriately.

On the whole we find the collection is best left till the end of the service.

And the single feature mentioned most often in the responses, **we like periods of silence.**

Food for thought here, whether you lead worship, attend as a member of a congregation, prepare the worship space or, like many of us, move between these roles; do we help or hinder other people's experience of worship?

If you are interested in a detailed analysis of the questionnaire results please contact Barbara at [barbarasmith366@](mailto:barbarasmith366@btinternet.com)

btinternet.com, or on 01225 761866.

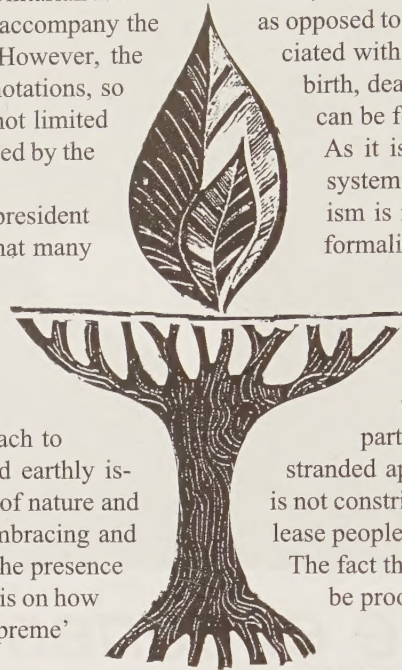
Pagan leader spoke to Earth Spirit

By Hilary Koe and Rowan Plath

The Unitarian Earth Spirit Network (UESN) began life in 1990 as the Unitarian Pagan Network. It was founded in response to a perceived need for a third spiritual strand in the Unitarian fellowship – relating to nature, spirit and creation – to accompany the existing Liberal Christian and Humanist ones. However, the name ‘Pagan’ was seen as having negative connotations, so it was renamed. Its membership is eclectic and not limited to Pagans and/or Unitarians. This was demonstrated by the varied debate which followed the lecture.

The guest speaker was Prudence Jones, a former president of the UK Pagan Federation. She reminded us that many parts of orthodox faith systems have antecedents in ancient Pagan rituals, and emphasised that Pagans spend time trying to find common ground with other religions. However, the focus was on areas of difference.

Pagans tend to take a grounded, practical approach to spirituality; rather than one seeking to transcend earthly issues. Feeling themselves to be part of the world, of nature and its eco-system; Pagans express spirituality by embracing and enjoying what the Earth has to offer. Regarding the presence of unseen powers, or deities, as a given, the focus is on how to relate to them, rather than identifying the ‘supreme’



or ‘right’ god, and then worshipping him, or her.

Tending to meet in informal, neutral, social spaces, Pagans practices are based on ritual, rather than belief. There are no prescribed rituals, and they tend to mark the passage of time in a cyclical, as opposed to linear, way. For example, rituals could be associated with the seasons, movements of the sun and moon, birth, death, or rebirth. Further information about rituals can be found on the UESN website.

As it is not based on a fundamental, unifying belief system, and contains many different strands, Paganism is not always recognised as a religion. A lack of formalised organisational structures means that Pagans aren’t necessarily predisposed to participate easily in groups such as inter-faith networks (although many Pagans may wish to be involved in such groups). Yet these same aspects mean that Paganism can be particularly appealing to Unitarians. The mainstream approach appeals to some Unitarians because it is not constrictive or prescriptive, and it may also help to release people from the restrictions they place on themselves. The fact that the UESN is thriving after 20 years seems to be proof of this!

Rowan Plath is a member at Norwich

Another success for Anniversary choir

By Kathy Packer

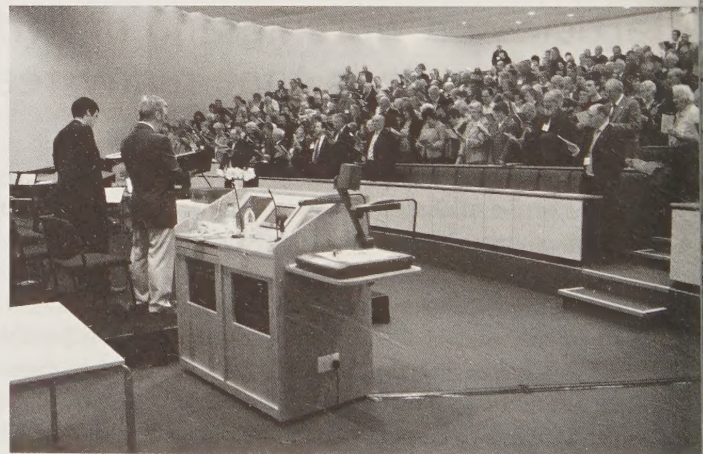
Choir ... At the GA meetings, I overheard the word “choir”. Where? – when? I excitedly ask around. I love singing! And so I join with other intrepid singers in expectation. What delights are in store for us? I see some familiar faces, but there are new people too. We shuffle around trying to separate sopranos and altos, tenors and bases, whilst the music scores are distributed and more singers come in.

Finally we are in order and we begin to sing tentatively at first, but I sense that I have sung this music before – ‘Come and find the quiet centre’ – yes I am sure. The words set to a lovely lilting tune, are encouraging us to put aside our busy everyday lives and engage with the spiritual side of our lives. The tune is “Lewis Folk Melody”. Lovely!

Then another: ‘You are the song of my heart in the morning’, set to a tune with a slightly wistful feel. It was composed by our musical maestro David Dawson, who named it ‘Wharfedale’, the Yorkshire dale in which he lives. It is left to each singer or listener to interpret the words ‘You’ and ‘Yours’ in other verses. In the service everyone was invited to join in singing this beautiful hymn.

The other contribution was humming a tune whilst ‘The Oversoul’ by Ralph Waldo Emerson was read. This required just as much concentration as the other music.

The second rehearsal, a few more people join us. This is the time when we become more confident and refine our expression of the music, frequently looking to David who is guiding us in timing, volume and expression. And then in the service itself, we also needed to be aware of when we are to stand and sit, neatly to



The Anniversary Service choir led the large congregation in singing several hymns, including ones from ‘Sing Your Faith, the new, purple hymnbook. Photo by John Hewerdine

gether.

Why do we join with others to sing in a choir, offering wonderful music for the Anniversary Service? In singing together we have more confidence; our voices can resound in the large auditorium and we can express our spirituality together.

I love singing because it is an expression of my spirituality. There is always the possibility that some combination of words and music or just the music, will lift me to a higher spiritual experience of exquisite joy.

The Rev Kathy Packer is South Devon Area assistant minister

Faith and Public issues looked at access

Jean Bradley

Faith and Public Issues and Denominational Support Committee offered a workshop at the GA, led by Dot Hewerdine and Rev Jeff Gould.

A large number of people gathered for the meeting which aimed to show that there was interest and enthusiasm in trying to improve the reception that our churches and chapels give to newcomers.

After a talk on the importance of welcoming strangers and exchanging stories of good and bad practice, we were asked to contribute into small groups and share welcoming ideas. We were given a sheet with signs that can be used for public buildings. A dialogue followed as many people admitted being unaware of important signs or symbols, particularly those dealing with disability issues. This discussion made it clear that many of us did not see the importance of the greater need to make clear statements through signs or speech.

The workshop highlighted issues that all places of worship must be aware of if they are to attract new members; the church must be clean and show no signs of neglect, the notice board should be up to date, hymn books and information on the service must be easily seen or handed over by a member of the congregation, and the door or the gate should be wide open for visitors.

It might be considered that these are obvious things and that churches or chapels are free from these negative aspects, but it does not seem to be the case. It should also be realised that some congregations worship in quite gloomy buildings which are dark and uninviting, or that in some churches members stand or sit together in tight circles at refreshments time after service so that any stranger would immediately feel ostracized. Or perhaps even worse, too much of an enthusiastic reception can be just as



An open door and a welcoming atmosphere are essential. Photo by James Barry

off-putting!

The whole issue of welcoming is fraught with problems, and so many people don't realise what their place of worship is saying to a stranger, simply because they are used to the building, know where everything is and probably have loved the place for years. I think it was a very worthwhile exercise that was undertaken by Dot and Jeff and I know it was appreciated.

But to conclude I would recommend a practice that one of my tutors from my ministry training days told me, and that is to ask everyone in the congregation to play the gormless game! The idea is to pretend they have never set foot in the building before. They then try to find out where toilets, hymn books (which ones are to be used on that day) and after service coffee, and so on are. Could they do it without prior knowledge? Why don't we all test it and see what we can see.

The Rev Jean Bradley is minister at Knutsford.

Taizé turned tired crowd into worshippers

Caroline Blair

I have to confess that I attended this Unitarian Christian Association Taizé service with the vaguest of motives. The programme suggested that, "simple, repetitive chants, sung in a variety of languages, encourage meditation and contemplation in an accessible way." Who could find anything to object to in that? It was only when I studied the order of service that a faint sense of disquiet struck me. This was, it appeared, rather hard-core Christianity compared to the services we get at Kensington. There were Bible readings, prayers of intercession; The Lord's prayer. I began to get the prickly-heat sense of embarrassment that is characteristic of non-Christians suddenly immersed in a Christian service.

The physical environment did not help. If I could choose a Christian service to attend it would be somewhere like Iona Abbey with background sounds of waves, seabirds and wind; here I was sitting in the same windowless lecture theatre I had already been in for hours, surrounded by health and safety notices, with the mixed sounds of the air conditioning system and the drone of traffic outside describing the best route to somewhere avoiding the nasty traffic bottleneck at somewhere else. Omens did not look good.

And yet, I quickly realized that it was not the sort of Christian service that involved the minister badgering the saved to come forward and testify, leading the rest of us to run screaming from

the room. This was a quiet sharing, in a spirit of generosity and kindness, of what was valued by those involved. The silent meditation – at 10 minutes, longer than the silences we normally have at our church on a Sunday morning – started off a mildly irritating confusion of sighs, rustling and fidgeting; then suddenly seemed to assume an extraordinary level of silence. The sense of a room full of people in profound silence was so strong that the background noises actually did seem to disappear. For a few minutes the unbroken silence seemed genuinely other-worldly.

On the other side of it, the chanting was oddly beautiful. Yes, we were a dreary lecture-theatre full of tired people, few of whom, presumably, were distinguished singers. But with the gentle accompaniment of keyboard, violin and viola, it somehow blended together; and for those few minutes, the Taizé chants seemed the loveliest sound in the world. For those of us who analyse everything, then analyse the analysis, there is particular value in repetitive chants: no need to read ahead (as the truism about Unitarians has it) to see if we agree with the words; we know what the words are as we have sung them before, and are able to let them go and enjoy the moment. Thanks to The Rev Jeff Gould and Catherine Fozard (and the musicians) for providing a Taizé service that so many of us could enjoy.

Caroline Blair is a member of Kensington Unitarians.

Gathering in Spirit for a hosepipe solo?

By Richard Merritt

More than 30 music lovers, players, singers and 'active listeners', gathered together in Great Hucklow recently for what turned out to be a most stimulating couple of days of musical exploration and enjoyable fellowship with the Unitarian Music Society. The workshop had a theme: essentially the ability of music to affect us deeply. Whether one described this effect as 'spiritual', 'religious' or something else entirely varied a lot from person to person, but a common experience for us was music's ability to affect us deeply at times, taking us into another world.

After an afternoon limbering up, singing under the skillful guidance of David Dawson, Adrienne Wilson shared with us the way music often brought her to tears. We were introduced to music by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and had the chance to sing things as varied as Finlandia, the African 'We are marching in the light of God' (185 in *Sing your Faith*) and *Some-where* from West Side Story.

The group was also introduced to Buddhist chanting, an excerpt from Elgar's 1st Symphony, a sample of Bach's organ music, a Muslim call to prayer, music by Gorecki and Ligeti, folk and jazz (performed by Shelley and Terry Perry respectively) and two hymns from *Sing Your Faith*. Discussing their reactions, participants particularly enjoyed the Buddhist chanting and the Elgar and had a long list of what they would themselves have added – early music, Celtic music, 'World' music, large scale choral music, solo piano to mention just a few. People discussed what helped make music a spiritual experience including the environment, the people with whom one shared the experience, skillful combination of music and words and also music's ability to communicate emotions which can't be easily put into words!

Our next session was highly participative. We were provided with words from the new book *With Heart and Mind* and in groups we assembled our own small acts of worship which combined words with music in different ways. The process demonstrated the feasibility of developing good quality worship from resources readily available to us. We were pleased to learn that a *With Heart and Mind* follow-up is on the way.

On Thursday afternoon, while some participants did their own thing (walking, playing music in groups or just re-charging the batteries) there was an enjoyable sharing of "spiritual" Desert Island Discs. Many of us found it hard to choose a single disc and even harder to play just a sample of it! The context was important in some cases, for example Mollie Clarke's meeting with Kathleen Ferrier and Christine Best's experience of an eclipse in the South of France. This was followed by "Sight-reading for the terrified". Although an optional session, a good number of us admitted to this particular terror and benefited from David Dawson's help.

Thursday night was concert night, highly varied fare which rather amazingly included a work for solo hosepipe, played expertly by professional horn player, Marcie Mcgaughey, who joined the UMS from the European Unitarian Universalists. Peter Sampson, acting as master of ceremonies, treated us to one of the highlights himself, a masterly recitation of *The Runcorn Ferry*.



A work for solo hosepipe was played expertly by professional horn player, Marcie Mcgaughey, who joined the UMS from the European Unitarian Universalists. Photo by James Barry

Each evening we finished our sessions with a short epilogue. The Rev Penny Johnson included a wonderful story of the cellist Tortellier's playing a concert accompanied by a resident butterfly! Dot and John Hewerdine calmed us with appropriate words and some beautiful music by Weber for clarinet and orchestra.

On our final morning we considered the choice of music for worship from the perspective of the worship leader (David Shaw), organist (Wynne Simister) and congregation member (Ken Johnson). A common message was team work between those involved, particularly between worship leader and accompanist. The organist will ideally want to know the theme of the service; the worship leader should be ready to impart this information. But there are different views about how important this is and how often this happens in practice. Choice of hymns, and particularly tunes, is of course a common area of concern for the congregation. When introducing a new tune playing the tune as introductory music before a service can be helpful; and of course one should avoid too many new tunes

at one go! Also, don't choose hymns which all have the same meter or key. Technology can be very helpful, in some cases as a fallback for the organist, but be sure also to have a fallback for the technology itself!

Given some of the discussion above, it was appropriate that we had a session devoted to understanding hymn meters (the LM, CM, 76.76D's listed in the hymn books). Then, after sorting out our *iambics* from our *trochaics*, we recorded some chants for NUF (who were preparing videos of worship for their website) before our final lunch concluded a most enjoyable, and also instructive, couple of days away.

Music lovers of whatever ability have another opportunity to make music together at the Nightingale centre, Hucklow on the weekend of 13-16 August, when UMS holds its annual get-together. Non-members will be very welcome to come along and taste what we get up to. For more information please contact Adrienne Wilson via 01483 421905 or adie@adiewilson.co.uk.

Richard Merritt is a member of the Unitarian Music Society.

For information on the next UMS weekend see:

<http://www.unitarian.org.uk/info/events.shtml>



The UCCN weekend was completely full. Members helped film a service at the Old Chapel, Great Hucklow, for the NUF web site. Below, John Wilkinson is at the camera while the Rev Tony McNeile speaks. Photos by James Barry

UCCN put themselves in the picture

By Angela Maher

Make a short film about your congregation, using your own photos and images, with a soundtrack to be recorded on the day.

Just the thing to kick-start me into signing up for my first ever Unitarian Communication Coordinators Network (UCCN) weekend. I'm pleased to report that I certainly did create a short film about my congregation, with the help of the DUWIT duo: James Barry and John Wilkinson. And I'm not the only one – even those who claimed to have never used PowerPoint before were producing very professional-looking films that will be great adverts for their own lively and active congregations.

Not only were we all helped to develop new multimedia skills, but, as usual, there was plenty of technical support available on creating Unitarian websites from the DUWIT team (go to www.ukunitarians.org.uk for more help).

I wasn't quite sure what to expect from the rest of the weekend, but I thought that since it was sold out, it would probably be pretty good. I wasn't disappointed.

Normally, I wouldn't describe myself as a communications coordinator, so I was very pleased to find that I wasn't the only person that just tried to do a little to help their own congregation create newsletters, or leaflets or similar.

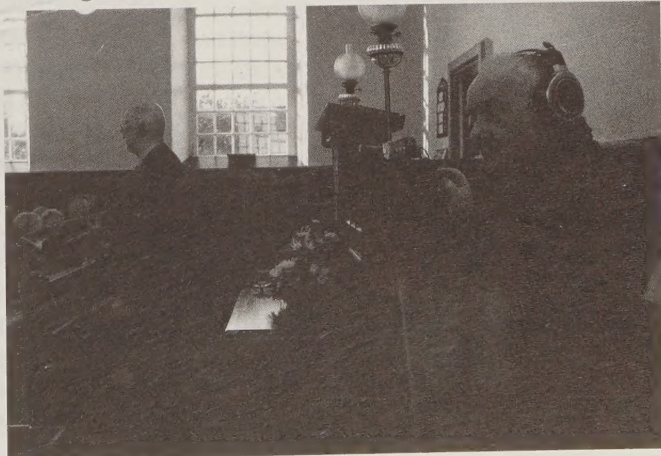
The participants included several UCCN stalwarts, but there were also lots of people who had never been to a UCCN event before and quite a few newer Unitarians who gave lots of ideas and suggestions. Everyone was incredibly friendly and we bonded through lively discussion, chats and networking. We mostly talked through some of the problems we'd had, and ideas we'd tried. I've come away with a list of things to suggest to my congregation – I hope they're ready for it.

Of course, it wasn't all fun and chatting. We were also inspired by:

- District-wide e-bulletins and newsletters in London and the South East
- High quality newsletters from congregations all over the country (some of my favourites were from Stockton, Dukinfield and Altrincham)
- Messages from the Ministers Growth Conference where they worked with Peter Morales, president of the 200,000 Unitarian Universalists in the USA
- Solutions to some of our common questions which we achieved in a large group discussion
- Feedback on the work of the Communications Commission – especially the grants that are available for local publicity
- Easy-to-use tips on creating excellent posters
- Leaflets for first time visitors to the Wirral Unitarians

That last item – the leaflets – is the inspiration for next year's weekend. I think my congregation would benefit from something like that and I bet yours would too. Hopefully, I'll see you at Hucklow next year.

Angela Maher is a member of Birmingham New Meeting.



Letters to the Editor

Unitarians are successful at 'growing' congregations
To the Editor:

In current discussions on growth, it's easy to overlook the fact that many of our congregations have grown numerically in the past 20 years. Where's the evidence for this? Well, I found it in Jeff Teagle's 2007 lecture on the future of the Unitarian ministry (the John Relly Beard Lecture). In this, Jeff cites figures which show that while most congregations declined in membership between 1989 and 2005, a significant number actually grew.

In this 16-year period, our quota-paying national membership fell from 5,380 to 4,012, with 110 congregations losing members (and 21 more closing down). But at the same time, another 45 congregations grew in numbers (making up 25% of the overall total). It would be interesting to know more details about these congregations – and how they achieved growth. The figures highlight something we often seem to forget: namely, that we do have experience of 'growing congregations' *within our own movement*.

Jeff records that leaders of our denomination studied these figures at the time. I hope those newly-charged with encouraging growth (at national and district levels) will review this research and draw appropriate lessons – and that the results will be made available to us all.

Jim Corrigan

London

At Lewes, it's
either grow or go.

To the Editor:

Reading the recent letters in the *Inquirer*, I felt prompted to add my tuppence-worth to the question of what works to promote growth. A while ago, I and another new convert to Unitarianism stood in the High Street of Lewes, staffing a stall of Unitarian information leaflets. The local Farmers Market is a monthly event and we obtained permission to have an information stall among the fresh produce being offered to Lewes. We, as newish Unitarians, feel we have something fresh to offer most people as well. Organic religion!

'Allowing people to see that Unitarians are not some out-of-space monsters, but just nice ordinary people, is our biggest strength.' – Andy Camper

We started the stall with conversation between us about what brought us together as now Unitarians. Answer was "we sought out a spiritual home". Then asked what had brought people to try out Westgate Chapel Lewes over the last couple of years or so? Numerically we have increased membership and friends of Westgate during the time I have taken on the role of local minister at Westgate. But we also lost one or two other people who had been here for some time.

I am a professional minister – although not a Unitarian one – and realistically Westgate has grown because it has started to do its best to "do church".

We have offered weddings again, child namings and funerals while building our reputation of doing these things well. We have also had regular services and I have attended meetings at the town hall for fair-trade events and so-on and so-forth. People in the area are starting to recognise we are a "church" liberal enough to offer something different to people, Gay weddings for one. We are striving to be a church of the people, reflecting their spirituality not imposing dogma upon them.

I think we have also changed from being inward looking to being more outward looking, and this in itself has been a struggle. We have I feel started to *hope* our small very fragile congregation has more to offer than just an ancient building for good uses.

One family to join us came because we provided a sacred naming service for their son and this inspired us to look for people at the market who were either heavily pregnant or had new born babies, then we offered them the excellent leaflet about naming. Most took the leaflet, one or two refused. Maybe it will speak to them and make them consider having a service to celebrate the new life and wonder of children. At least we are reaching outward. One or two people actually

were interested in Unitarians as well.

What works to promote growth at Westgate is "we either grow or go". It would be a shame to see this congregation fold and that is still a possibility. But the most important thing to do is to be a "church", a spiritual home for those who for a variety of reasons are seeking a liberal family of believers. Getting out into the community and meeting people and offering them information about who we are and what we stand for may work. Just one of those 50 child-naming leaflets could potentially bring a new family to join us. They won't do that stuck in the rack of leaflets inside our foyer gathering dust.

Allowing people to see that Unitarians are not some out-of-space monsters, but just nice ordinary people, is our biggest strength. If we want to grow we know we have got to take our information and do something proactive not just think about it. Otherwise we shall just go and die.

Andy Camper

Minister Associated with Westgate
Unitarian Chapel, Lewes

Inquirer letters policy

Letters should be succinct. It is preferable that they are sent by email to inquirer@btinternet.com. Typewritten or legible handwritten submissions may be sent to the editor at 46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich NR4 6UF.

Letters should be signed with the writer's full name and, if applicable, the name of the group or congregation with which the writer is affiliated. A postal address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes.

Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only, and should not suggest the view expressed is representative of that body.

Chapels celebrate Celia's ministry

By Aled Jones and John Midgley

What does a retiring minister present as a farewell gift to the congregation that has everything? This was the dilemma facing Celia Midgley on ending her 21-year ministry at Queens Road Church, Urmston in April. It was the end of an era, as she had followed me in ministry there. I too had served just over 20 years in the same ministry, linked with Dunham Road Chapel, Altrincham.

Celia knew a farewell celebration was planned. The word was sent out to all members and friends. She also knew that when it comes to celebration time, the Urmston folk sure know how to party! And so it was. From far and near they came to a nearby Chinese restaurant and into its crowded function room upstairs. They were greeted by a magician whose amazing tricks kept them enthralled until the musical entertainment began. On came a cabaret singer to keep everyone in a sing-along mood, until it was time to eat.

Next came the farewell speeches. The Rev Penny Johnson, a colleague and friend, representing the Manchester District Association, spoke of Celia's long years of devoted, conscientious and highly professional service to the congregation, the district and the Unitarian movement nationally, having served her year as a memorable GA President. There had been notable international contacts too, including visits to Transylvania, with which Urmston has a long-standing, special link.

Derek Brown, chair of the church committee, spoke movingly of Celia's weekly worship services, pastoral care, the conduct of memorable rites of passage and her love of nature, all of which has enriched her ministry and the life of the congregation. There were even greetings from Christian churches in the town, where Celia is well known for her work with the



The Revs Celia and John Midgley presented the congregation with a wooden board on which all the names of the ministers who served Altrincham since 1814 are inscribed.

local Council of Churches.

There were more generous words and gifts.

Celia replied, reflecting on her 21 years, stressing what was for her, always, the crucial purpose of a congregation, its worship. And then came the farewell gift. What could it be? I appeared with a large, pink-ribboned parcel, which was opened to reveal a handsome, bright red, new church notice-board, greeted with approving applause.

Though sad to see Celia go, the Urmston folk, determined to make this a positive celebration, returned to the party. And who should appear to keep the mood cheerful but an Elvis Presley look-alike, complete with blue suede shoes!

The new notice-board is now in place in the church, already displaying, for all to see, the forthcoming attractions of this lively, forward-looking and appreciative congregation.

Meanwhile, at Altrincham

On Sunday 25 April, Celia led her last service in Altrincham and the Rev Keith Gilley gave a moving tribute in his beautifully crafted address during which he read his poem 'A gift to Celia.' Then it was time for the congregational photograph followed by a wonderful lunch for the congregation and guests, with musical accompaniment by a trio of musicians from the Halle orchestra led by a talented harpist.

Angela Fowler, chairperson of the congregation, gave a speech of thanks. Celia was presented with a bouquet of flowers and a cheque and Angela presented John with a beautiful red bow tie. The Rev Dr Ann Peart and Neville Kenyon (GA president) gave speeches of appreciation for Celia's work for the two congregations. After Celia and John had expressed their thanks, they surprised us all by presenting the congregation with a beautiful wooden board on which was inscribed, in gold, all the names of the ministers of the Chapel since 1814.

John and Celia between them have served the joint ministry for 42 years and it is hard to imagine the two congregations without them. We wish them well in their new lives. They are moving away from Manchester but will not be TOO far away.

Aled Jones is a member of the Altrincham congregation.

The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.

£360 for children's hospice

At a recent coffee morning, £360 was presented to East Anglia's Children's Hospices (EACH) by the Unitarian Congregation in Bury St Edmunds. The contribution will help with the new purpose-built children's hospice for Suffolk.

The cheque was present by Richard



Hegerty, Chair of the Unitarian Congregation, to Beccy Turner, community fund-raising assistant for EACH, after Beccy spoke about the work of EACH (see photo). EACH provides support for children with life-threatening and complex illnesses and help for their families including short term breaks, 24-hour support and advice, special therapies including music, physio, occupational and specialist play and end-of-life care. The money was raised by the congregation through a croquet tournament, monthly collections and a congregational Christmas card scheme. The congregation was so impressed with the work of EACH and the need for help with their new facility in Suffolk that they have decided to adopt EACH again this coming year as their local charity.

— Photo and text, Martin Gienke

News in brief

MDA marks 150-year anniversary



Members of the Manchester District Association at Oldham Unitarian Chapel for their Annual General Meeting on 24 April. Photo by Bob Pounder

By Aled Jones

The Manchester District Association (MDA) held its Annual General Meeting at Oldham Unitarian Chapel on Saturday 24th April. This was an excellent meeting hosted by Marion Nuttall and her small, but dedicated, team of helpers. Members had the opportunity to admire the new stained-glass window of the chapel. The MDA welcomed guests from the East Cheshire Union and the North and East Lancashire Unitarian Mission.

Daniel Crosby (Student Minister at Oldham) led the opening devotions, then it was on to the business meeting presided over by the Rev Ann Peart, past president, in the absence of current president, the Rev Alex Bradley. The Rev Penny Johnson, secretary, and Treasurer Martin West gave an account of their stewardship during 2009, when the MDA had helped a number of member congregations with ministerial and fabric grants.

It was time to bid farewell and give thanks to the Revs Celia and John Midgley, who have been loyal and faithful members of the MDA and it was calculated, that between them, they had served it for 68 years. President-elect Ken Johnson thanked them for their loyal service to the district and to the four member congregations they ministered to during this time. Ken presented them with a floral gift and wished them both a happy retirement.

The afternoon session was devoted to a service celebrating 150 (+1) years since the beginnings of the Manchester District Association. The Rev Ann Peart, assisted by Student Lay Pastor Nicky Jenkins, led the service and Geoffrey Head traced

the MDA's origins back to the Manchester Unitarian Association formed in 1859. For the next three decades this was very active in funding new Unitarian places of worship in the Greater Manchester area and wealthy Unitarians gave substantial sums for church buildings. This organisation was replaced in 1890 by the MDA, which at its time of formation consisted of 17 Unitarian congregations.

Today the MDA has 13 member congregations and during the service representatives from each congregation lighted a candle to celebrate its history, gave thanks for the present and thoughts for the future.

This was an excellent AGM, the essential business was efficiently dispatched, we celebrated present ministry, gave thanks for a century and a half of Unitarianism in the Greater Manchester Area and, last but not least, we enjoyed the companionship of fellow Unitarians.

Aled Jones is a member of the Altrincham Congregation.



The Rev Penny Johnson lighted candles representing the congregations in the MDA. Photo by Bob Pounder

Matthew Henry's Chapel Chester is moving

Along with many of our other congregations, Matthew Henry's Chapel Chester has been experiencing the dwindling of numbers. We have been looking at all the ways we are being encouraged in growth and renewal. The first thing we did was to listen as to why people are no longer attending and top of the list has been that we meet at the wrong time.

To enable us to meet at a different time we will have to move building and we have taken the step of doing just this. From 6 June we will be moving to the Chester Offices Club Lounge, Plas Newton Lane, Chester, CH2 1PR. The service will start at 10.30 am. We will meet on the 1st and 3rd Sundays.

This venue is near the zoo and the city and there is ample free car parking. So if anyone wishes to have a day out in Chester, why not visit our new venue and enjoy morning service?

— Eileen Wiggins

Gaskell Bicentenary to be celebrated at Westminster Abbey

All Unitarians are invited to attend the dedication of a pane of glass to Elizabeth Gaskell in the memorial window in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey on Saturday 25 September, following the evensong service, which will start at 3.00pm. The dedication ceremony will begin about 4pm. There will be time to look round the Abbey free of charge before it closes at 5pm. This event has been arranged by the Gaskell Society which has funded the cost of the design and installation of the window along with a one-off payment for its future maintenance. The dedication will probably have the highest profile of the many events planned for the bicentenary year. For details see: www.gaskellsociety.co.uk/calend.html

— The Rev Dr Ann Peart